

# THE ILLUSION OF REINCARNATION

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In modern Buddhist jargon, the terms "rebirth" and "reincarnation" are considered synonyms and, due mainly to the popularity of some lamas regarded as *tulkus*<sup>1</sup> or, as is commonly said, "reincarnations" of important spiritual masters of the past, the conviction has spread that the belief in reincarnation is really based on the Buddha's teaching. But, as Gyatrul Rinpoche affirmed, the "genuine tulkus" are not persons who, after having discarded a body, come back to take another one; instead they are "effortless emanations" comparable to "light rays emanating from the sun."<sup>2</sup> Therefore, if tulkus do not transmigrate according to the common conception of reincarnation, what does the rebirth of people who are not tulkus consist in?

At the Buddha's time, a monk disciple of his, immortalized as "Sāti, the fisherman's son," on the basis of stories of past lives recounted by the Buddha, believed that it was one and the same consciousness to pass from body to body; so he said: "As I understand the Dharma taught by the Blessed One, it is this same consciousness, not another, that continues and flows through the rounds of births."<sup>3</sup> After having summoned Sāti, the Buddha inquired of him what was the consciousness subject to rebirth. Sati answered: "Revered sir, it is that which speaks and feels here and there; it feels the results of good and evil deeds."

Sāti's reply seems obvious: the consciousness or mind that transmigrates, wandering in the cycles of rebirths, is just that which speaks and has experiences here and there, in this place and in a different one, at this time and at another one; in fact, it is always just this same consciousness that experiences the effects of positive and negative deeds (*karma*) in all those existences. Even nowadays, many Buddhists would implicitly agree with Sāti, yet they should reflect on the firm and severe words spoken by the Buddha after Sāti's reply: "You, misguided one, have misrepresented me by your wrong understanding and harmed yourself, and stored much demerit – for, this will bring you harm and suffering for a long time."

As Piya Tan has written, introducing the quoted text, "The *Mahātaṇhāsāṅkhaya Sutta* teaches the conditionality of consciousness (*viññāṇa*). Consciousness, in other words, is not an entity (like an immortal 'soul' or enduring 'substance') transmigrating life after life, but it is a 'stream of consciousness' (*viññāṇa-sota*)."<sup>4</sup> Therefore, if not even ordinary beings transmigrate according to the common conception of reincarnation, what is the cycle of rebirths called *saṃsāra*? I shall try to answer this question turning to a non-canonical Buddhist source, the *Milindapañha*, which relates the supposed dialogue of the 2nd Century B.C.E. between the Indo-Greek king Milinda (Menander I Soter) and the Buddhist monk Nāgasena. I shall next cite some passages of particular significance.

"What is meant by the round of rebirths (*saṃsāra*)?"

"Whoever is born here, dies here and is born elsewhere. Having been born there they die and are born somewhere else."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Tibetan word *tulku* (*sprul sku*) corresponds to the Sanskrit term *nirmāṇakāya*.

<sup>2</sup> Padmasambhava, *Natural Liberation*, Commentary by Gyatrul Rinpoche (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2008), pp. 151-152.

<sup>3</sup> *Mahātaṇhāsāṅkhaya Sutta* (*Majjhima Nikāya* 38.1). Cf. Piya Tan, [SD 7.10](#), p. 187.

<sup>4</sup> Piya Tan, [SD 7.10](#), p. 179.

<sup>5</sup> Bhikkhu Pesala, *The Debate of King Milinda* (Penang: Inward Path, 2001), p. 65. Cf. T. W. Rhys Davids, *The Questions of King Milinda* (Part I, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1890), p. 120 (III.6.9).

"What is it, Nāgasena, that is reborn?"

"Mind and matter."<sup>6</sup>

"You were explaining just now about mind and matter. Therein, what is mind and what is matter?"

"Whatever is gross is materiality, whatever is subtle and mind or mental-states is mentality."<sup>7</sup>

Mind and matter (*nāma-rūpa*) constitute the psychophysical organism. Usually, 'name' (*nāma*) does not include consciousness or mind (*citta*), but solely mental factors (*cetasika*), yet here the term is defined as whatever is subtle, the mind and mental-states or factors<sup>8</sup> in a physical body which is matter or 'form' (*rūpa*). Rebirth would thus concern just such a psychophysical organism.<sup>9</sup> Evidently, the word 'rebirth' must not be understood literally, otherwise one should also consider the new physical body the rebirth of a preceding physical body. In fact, the term *paṭisandahati*, translated in the former quotation as "is reborn", means precisely "links again, reconnects." Therefore, rebirth is a link, connection or bond that is established, due to karma, between the past life and the new life: the conscious subject of the former life does not come back to live again, just as its physical body does not live again. On this point the following passage is explicit:

"Is it this very mind and matter that is reborn?"

"No, it is not, but by this mind and matter deeds are done and because of those deeds another mind and matter is reborn."<sup>10</sup>

In the *Mahātaṇhāsāṅkhaya Sutta*, that starts with the confrontation between the Buddha and the monk Sāti, the consciousness which has abandoned the physical body and finds itself in the intermediate state (*antarā-bhava*) is called *gandhabba* (in Sanskrit *gandharva*), namely a "spirit." With its karma the spirit conditions the forming of the new organism; nevertheless it does not become the psyche of that body, as Sāti mistakenly believed. In fact, the consciousness of the preceding life and the consciousness of the subsequent life are not the very same individual, because they spring up on the basis of different conditions, yet belong to one uninterrupted stream of consciousness (*viññāṇa-sota*).<sup>11</sup> The *Milindapañha* clarifies this point, specifying that mind and matter arise together as yolk and eggshell:

"Why are they not born separately?"

"These conditions are related like the yolk of an egg and its shell, they always arise together and thus they have been related through time immemorial."<sup>12</sup>

Although the new psychophysical organism is not the same organism of the former life, neither is it totally different from that; indeed, they belong to the same stream of consciousness:

"He who is reborn, Nāgasena, is he the same person or another?"

"Neither the same nor another."

"Give me an illustration."

"In the case of a pot of milk that turns first to curds, then to butter, then to ghee, it would not

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<sup>6</sup> Bhikkhu Pesala, *op. cit.*, p. 46. Cf. Rhys Davids, *op. cit.*, p. 71 (II.2.6).

<sup>7</sup> Bhikkhu Pesala, *op. cit.*, p. 47. Cf. Rhys Davids, *op. cit.*, p. 76 (II.2.8).

<sup>8</sup> *Ye tattha sukhumā cittacetasikā dhammā*. In this context mind or "name" is a synonym of "mental body" (*nāma-kāya*), while matter or "form" stands for "physical body" (*rūpa-kāya*).

<sup>9</sup> See *Cetanā Sutta* 2 (*Samyutta Nikāya* 12.39) that refers to rebirth (*punabbhava*) as "the descent of name-and-form" (*nāma-rūpassa avakkanti*). Cf. Piya Tan, [SD 7.6abc](#), pp. 52, 55-56, 61-62.

<sup>10</sup> Bhikkhu Pesala, *op. cit.*, p. 46. Cf. Rhys Davids, *op. cit.*, p. 71 (II.2.6).

<sup>11</sup> See *Sampasādanīya Sutta* (*Dīgha Nikāya* 28.7); cf. Piya Tan, [SD 14.14](#), p. 117.

<sup>12</sup> Bhikkhu Pesala, *op. cit.*, p. 47. Cf. Rhys Davids, *op. cit.*, pp. 76-77 (II.2.8).

be right to say that the ghee, butter and curds were the same as the milk, but they have come from that, so neither would it be right to say that they are something else."<sup>13</sup>

The link between the former life and the present one consists in the psychic inheritance of the karma pool, analogous to the biological inheritance of the gene pool, as one may infer from the following metaphor illustrating the mechanism of *samsāra*:

"It is like the case of a man who, after eating a mango, should set the seed in the ground. From that a great tree would be produced and give fruit. And there would be no end to the succession, in that way, of mango trees."<sup>14</sup>

The mango seed symbolizes the psychic inheritance of the karma pool; so, just as a mango tree does not transmigrate into a tree born from its seed, there is no real transmigration of an entity from body to body. King Milinda was probably familiar with the notion of transmigration, due to his Greek religious culture, therefore perhaps perceiving the Buddhist conception of *samsāra* as abstruse. The following passages attest to his difficulty and, at the same time, constitute the most widely known, ingenious answer given by Buddhist philosophy:

"Can there be any rebirth where there is no transmigration?"

"Yes there can, just as a man can light one oil-lamp from another but nothing moves from one lamp to the other; or as a pupil can learn a verse by heart from a teacher but the verse does not transmigrate from teacher to pupil."<sup>15</sup>

It is plain that the flame of a lamp, used to light another lamp, does not transfer from lamp to lamp, in the same way a poem or a song does not pass from brain to brain. There is an influence generated by the lit lamp on the unlit lamp or by one who recites some verses on one who hears them. Such influence symbolizes what in the text is called "rebirth" (*paṭisandhi*), that is, the karmic connection between a life which is finished and a life which is starting. Reincarnation, understood as transmigration (*saṅkamati*) of the same consciousness or soul through many existences is, therefore, a deceptive definition of *samsāra* from the viewpoint of the mind that, identified with the contents of its experience, erroneously believes itself to be the same conscious subject of all the lives considered as "its own". For this reason, the Buddha taught to transcend *samsāra* here and now, remaining free from the illusory identification of oneself with one's impermanent experience.

Let go of the past,  
let go of the future,  
let go of the present,  
and cross over  
to the farther shore of existence.  
With mind wholly liberated,  
you shall come no more  
to birth and death.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Bhikkhu Pesala, *op. cit.*, p. 43. Cf. Rhys Davids, *op. cit.*, pp. 63, 65 (II.2.1).

<sup>14</sup> Rhys Davids, *op. cit.*, p. 120 (III.6.9).

<sup>15</sup> Bhikkhu Pesala, *op. cit.*, p. 59. Cf. Rhys Davids, *op. cit.*, p. 111 (III.5.5).

<sup>16</sup> *Dhammapada* 348 (24.15). See *The Dhammapada: The Buddha's Path of Wisdom*, Translated by Acharya Buddhārakkhita (Buddhist Publication Society, 1985), p. 36.